

FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Reversal of Fortune

December 10, 2000

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Reverend

The trained mind when brought face to face with the mystery of Jesus has no choice but to seek to reduce it to a manageable unit of comprehension in order to understand it. In other words it has to make sense . . . Despite all the merit that there is in the scholarly and reverential researches into the facts concerning the historical Jesus, they do not, nor can they, explain him adequately . . . If God is and if God is love, as I believe most profoundly, and if in Jesus there is the projection of this central affirmation in concrete flesh and blood, then in such a person there are inevitably precious clues as to the meaning of God and the meaning of life. His way of life, then, becomes *the* way of life at its highest and best. Thus the historical quest throws important light upon the central figure of the Christmas story.

Howard Thurman
The Mood of Christmas

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:39-56

**“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.”
(Luke 1:52)**

Merciful God, in the midst of the color and light and busyness of the season, your word bids us to silence and darkness and introspection. So silence in us any voice but yours. Startle us with your truth and open our hearts and our minds to your word which judges us with your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

My mailbox isn't big enough these days. In fact, it is clogged. It is big enough most of the year, but beginning in late October and early November, the volume begins to swell and the box fills to overflowing so that it takes a real effort to extract its contents each day. It's the annual deluge of catalogs—a whole new genre of literature created by consumer culture. They come in all sizes and degrees of sophistication. They come from retail businesses from which we have made purchases and from businesses we know about and businesses we have never heard of and in which we have no interest whatsoever. Some of them are beautiful. The catalogs urge me to buy clothing, kitchen utensils, housewares, stereophonic equipment, wine, cheese, flowers, plants, pet accessories—even though we have no pets—art, photographic equipment, treadmills, vacations, health club special offers to take care of the damage accrued in holiday eating and drinking. They come in multiples, one, two, three gorgeous glossy volumes from the same enterprise. It may be my imagination, but there seem to be more of them than ever this year—and that does make a kind of sense in a time of unprecedented prosperity and consumer spending. The daunting marketing challenge is to persuade people who have so much that they must have and buy and give more.

There is a sense in which attacking the commercialization of Christmas from the pulpit is not only easy but predictable. Churchgoers come to expect at least one December sermon on the capture of our festival by secular culture, the cult of Santa Claus, the erosion of any religious content in the face of overwhelming commercialization and in order not to offend anyone's sensibilities. I actually think that's a good idea. I don't think Christmas ought to offend anybody—unless the offense comes from really listening to the story, but that gets us a little ahead of ourselves. I really don't think it's a good idea for Marshall Field or the Michigan Avenue Business Association to promote the Christian content of Christmas. That's what we're here for. But there has been a transition, has there not? Years ago I had a brief job at J.C. Penney during college vacation. I was assigned to the work and hunting clothes department in the back

of the store. In those days in Western Pennsylvania, my customers were mostly women buying their husbands heavy bulky jackets for work on the railroad or for deer hunting.

And my memory, in addition to never being able to wrap one of those huge, bulky, red and black plaid hunting jackets—in the day when wrapping meant brown paper and string and having to ask my customer if she wouldn't like to help out or even wrap it herself rather than carry home the mess I was making—my memory of working in the J.C. Penney's for two weeks in December is of the 45 RPM record that played over and over again, from opening to closing time: Percy Faith—"God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" and "Joy to the World." Some enterprising soul called the Musak Holiday Channel to find out the most popular Christmas music for retail stores, elevators, and dentist offices this year and discovered that number one this year is still "The Christmas Song" with Nat King Cole—"Chestnuts Roasting," followed by "White Christmas," "Winter Wonderland," and "Silver Bells."

I'm not complaining, but there has been a change. And the deluge of catalogs spilling out of my mailbox and the stark Michigan Avenue reality that something close to 80 percent of the year's business needs to happen in December (parenthetically, a good portion of that 80 percent must have happened yesterday; it was no day out there for a man with a cane)—all of that stands in such sharp contrast to the way Christmas is anticipated here, in the church, with Advent candles and hymns of exile and hope in a minor key—"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel"—with green garlands and winsome but modest electric sheep.

There is a tension between Christian faith and prevailing culture always, but it is never more evident than during Advent.

Theologian Cornelius Plantinga Jr. wrote in a recent *Christian Century* essay,

"I'm thinking that when life is good, our prayers for the kingdom get a little faint. We whisper our prayers for the kingdom so that God can't quite hear them. 'Thy kingdom come,' we pray and hope it won't. . . . When our kingdom has had a good year, we aren't necessarily looking for God's kingdom. When life is good, redemption doesn't sound so good." ("In the Interim, Between Two Advents," *Christian Century*, 6 December 2000.)

That is why the church in Advent takes us places we would rather not go. "Who can endure the day of his coming?" the prophet Malachi asks. "For he is like a refiner's fire and a fuller's soap." Those are not metaphors with much market potential. A refiner's fire burns until it cleanses. Fuller's soap cleans by the process of abrasion.

And in the Gospels, it begins with a sweet story that has a decided edge to it. A young girl is pregnant, and that is not good news, not in our day and not in hers. She is engaged but not married. She has a strange encounter, a dream perhaps. A messenger from God has told her she has been chosen to bear a child, God's own son, and that her pregnancy has been caused by God's Holy Spirit. Unaccountably, bravely, young Mary, perhaps fourteen years old, consents. "Let it be with me, according to your word," she says to the messenger. And that moment of annunciation and Mary's consent have been memorialized in thousands of glorious paintings and

Ave Maria's. But soon she will not be able to disguise her condition—from her family, from the community, most frightening of all, from her fiancé, her “betrothed,” the good man Joseph whose wife she was intended to become. What in the world is she going to say to him when she turns up pregnant and he knows he's not the father? How in the world will she explain to her own mother, “Yes, I'm pregnant, but it's not what you think. You see, I had this dream and there was an angel.”

So Mary, young, marginalized by her condition in three ways—she's young, she's female, and she's unexpectedly and unaccountably pregnant—frightened, overwhelmed, is more like it, leaves home and goes to see an older and wiser relative: Elizabeth. It's such a human story: a frightened teenager fleeing to a grandmotherly-like older woman—for comfort, acceptance, understanding, love.

The Visitation, it is called. Elizabeth herself is pregnant in her old age. The baby in her womb leaps for joy in recognition. He will be John the Baptist. And old Elizabeth blesses young Mary: “Blessed are you among women.” Compared to what Mary's fiancé and neighbors and maybe her own mother were going to say, it is a moment of pure grace. And so Mary stays right there, with Elizabeth, for three months.

- But first, Luke tells us, she has something to say. We know her words as the Magnificat. “My soul magnifies the Lord,” and then this young girl looks ahead, to the implications, the results of the birth that will happen.

“The proud will be scattered—the powerful will be pulled from their thrones and the weak and poor will be lifted up, the hungry will be filled and the rich sent away empty.”

no Hallmark

There were places in Latin America, El Salvador, and Guatemala, where just a few years ago the public reading of the Magnificat was forbidden as subversive activity, with all that business about the mighty being pulled from their thrones and replaced by the weak and poor. Mary's definition of liberation sounded suspiciously like revolution to the ruling junta. When Luther and his followers translated the Bible into German, they left the Magnificat in Latin, untranslated. The German princes who were so helpful to Luther in his struggles with Rome also took a dim view of the social and political implications of the Magnificat's reversal of conventional values and social structures. Luther's friends and strongest supporters were sitting on the thrones in Northern Germany and so he left the Magnificat in Latin.

So what do we make of this peculiar incident—this poor pregnant young woman with her revolutionary rhetoric?

I think what it means is that you have to know how poor you are before you can receive the gift of your redemption. Not poor in terms of this world's goods, consumer goods, stuff. That won't work. We are not poor. But the Bible, starting with the Magnificat, wants to probe deeper. It seems at first that the Bible gives special treatment to the poor. The “Preferential Treatment of the Poor,” it is called. Students of the New Testament know it's there. But we don't like it much—those of us who do not qualify as “poor.” And yet the Bible does not glamorize poverty

RHB - Mary as Social Activist

William - Mary's son's revolt.

nor did Jesus condemn the people of means who gathered around him— Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, for instance.

It's just that poor people know their needs. And rich people sometimes don't. Wealthy, powerful people sometimes think they either have everything they need or know how to get it. Poor people know better than that. And so the real problem people in the Bible are not the overt sinners, the thieves, adulterers, prostitutes. Jesus accepts, forgives, restores, and generally seems to like their company. The people with real problems in the Bible, the ones who go away angry, are those who have concluded that they have no problems: no need for forgiveness, for instance, no need for healing and acceptance and grace, no need for re-creation and restoration, no need for redemption, no need for love, no need for Jesus.

Faith, in the Bible, begins with an acknowledgment of need, a confession of emptiness. Our culture, on the other hand, particularly during Advent, proclaims that your needs and mine may be met if we just earn enough, buy enough, give enough, get enough. The late Henri Nouwen wrote, "Our whole way of living is structured around climbing the ladder of success and making it to the top. Our very sense of validity is dependent upon being part of the upward pull and the joy provided by the rewards given on the way up."

But it doesn't work. The artists and poets know it.

T. S. Eliot called it *The Wasteland*. Gertrude Stein wrote, "When we get there, there is no one there."

Simon de Beauvoir reflected, "I think with sadness of all the books I have read, all the places I have seen, all the knowledge I have amassed. The promises have all been kept. And yet I realize with stupor how much I was gypped." (See Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?* page 693.)

And Anna Quindlen, *Newsweek* editorialist and author, recently published a graduation address she delivered, *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*. She recalls something Senator Paul Tsongas said when he decided not to run for reelection because he was diagnosed with cancer: "No man ever said on his deathbed, 'I wish I had spent more time in the office.'"

"Get a life," Quindlen writes, "a real life, not a manic pursuit of the next promotion, the bigger paycheck, the larger house. Do you think you'd care so much about these things if you developed an aneurysm one afternoon, or found a lump in your breast while in the shower?" (page 10).

Quindlen's mother died when she was nineteen, and it was the event that changed her life. She learned, after that loss, that life is precious, that it is a gift, that no amount of money can compensate for or equate with a life lived in commitment to others and gratitude and love.

That's what Mary's Magnificat means: acknowledging that we don't have it all and that to allow consumer culture to define what having it all means is to miss the whole point and potential of human life. It means acknowledging our need for something more, for authenticity, integrity, love.

You can't receive a gift if there are no empty rooms in your home, no empty spaces in your soul.

At the end of her little book, Anna Quindlen tells about one of her best teachers on the subject of living a happy life. She was doing a story on how homeless people suffer in the winter months, and she met a man on the boardwalk at Coney Island. They sat together: he told her about his daily routine, panhandling the boulevard when the summer crowds were gone, sleeping in a church when the temperatures went below freezing, hiding from the police among the amusement park rides. But, he told Anna Quindlen, most of the time he stayed on the boardwalk, facing the water, just as they were now, even when it got cold and he had to wear his newspapers after he read them. "I asked him why. Why didn't he go to one of the shelters? Why didn't he check himself into the hospital for detox? And he stared out at the ocean and said, 'Look at the view, young lady. Look at the view'" (page 50).

It is Advent. And the young pregnant girl suggests a quiet revolution, a reversal in the way you and I think and live and spend our time and invest our resources. Her little song makes us forever uncomfortable with the social and economic inequities and injustices in which we live. The Magnificat makes me very uncomfortable to drive out Division Street, through Cabrini, and see what our system, our consumer economy, has produced—poverty, unemployment, despair unparalleled in the industrial nations of the world. And it also means to make us equally uncomfortable with the way our own priorities and values cause us to miss the God-given potential for authentic love, real life.

It is Advent. A gift is about to be given. To receive it truly, you and I have to find a way in the next two weeks to slow down, to identify the empty spaces in our souls, to open our hands, to say with Advent worshipers across twenty centuries, "Come, Lord Jesus. Come with God's love to fill our lives. Come with God's disturbing love to upset our values. Come with God's redeeming love to reverse our fortune." Amen.